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ABSTRACT

Using a microanalytic case study approach, school effectiveness/school improvement strategies in a Northeastern urban public school district are examined. Recent research findings have indicated inconclusive and, at times, negative results related to the implementation of such strategies. The 202,469 students enrolled in 257 schools within the school district studied represent a broad range of ethnic groups (63.4% were black). Prior to the school improvement efforts, the school district was characterized by political difficulties, fiscal instability, and internal turmoil. The improvement plan focused on the elementary level and included a desegregation effort. The data trends indicated that while a worsening of school climate in the school improvement project schools was not a dominant feature, no claims of improvement in the overall project could be determined from the data. Major stages of evolution were: (1) introduction of the program and assessment of staffs' understanding of the goals; (2) assessment of school climate variables; and (3) collective discussions and proposals for action by school building improvement councils that met with central administration staff to formulate plans. It appears that, although school effectiveness tenets are viable means of initiating educational reform, the major impediment to school effectiveness/school improvement projects appears to be the issue of implementation. Implementation and related issues suggest that teacher empowerment is a critical aspect of this and all other attempts toward producing quality education. The future direction of the urban school improvement project, which focuses on a holistic approach to educating the so-called "disadvantaged" or "at risk" student, is discussed. A 44-item list of references is included. (TJH)

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MOVING INTO THE NEXT PHASE OF "SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS" - WITH HEAVY BAGGAGE: AN EVALUATION OF A DISTRICTWIDE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

MOVING INTO THE NEXT PHASE OF "SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS" - WITH HEAVY BAGGAGE: AN EVALUATION OF A DISTRICTWIDE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

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The school effectiveness experiences, of urban public school systems, in America serve as a pivotal means of developing understanding of the potential for success inherent in school improvement strategies. This study utilizes a microanalysis approach, i.e., a case study of a "typical" large urban public school system, to provide a generalizable perspective on America's urban public education direction, and school effectiveness strategies.

The future directions of school improvement initiatives in major American urban public schools are discussed, based on an analysis of recent research findings which have indicated inconclusive (and at times negative) results related to the implementation of school effectiveness strategies.

In response to the "limited success" that urban public schools may have had with previously attempted initiatives, the recent focus is on reallocation of resources, e.g., Chapter 1 (federally funded) programs and money, along with an emphasis on both comprehensive and supplementary services to students and parents. Such programs are the latest and the most significant attempts to implement and ultimately legitimize school effectiveness research, i.e., translate the theory into a practical (and successful) paradigm.

This study focuses on one major urban public school system in America, and describes/analyzes the future policy directions of school improvement programs. This study draws on current research and evaluation findings in the literature and in major urban public school systems. The chief concluding finding of this study is that project implementation and related issues are the chief impediments to the success of school improvement projects. Until educational policymakers and administrators realize and act on such considerations, quality education for all of America's public school children will remain an unattainable goal.

Moving Into the Next Phase of "School Effectiveness Programs" - With Heavy Baggage: An Evaluation of a Districtwide School Improvement Project

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make explicit the key impediments to success within school improvement projects, and the school effectiveness movement in large urban public school systems. The lessons that can be learned from such programs will be discussed within the context of the future direction(s) of public school improvement projects.

This study draws on the research and evaluation findings from a large urban public school system in the northeastern United States. A review of the educational literature on school effectiveness/school improvement projects, in other urban public school settings, provides a supportive base for suggesting the potential generalizability of findings from this micro-analysis.

The major impediment to school effectiveness/school improvement projects, to be discussed in this study, is the issue of implementation. This study explores how projects' attempts at increasing educational quality are subject to severe limitations, as long as policy-makers continue to ignore the lessons from previous improvement efforts.

This study concludes with a discussion of the future direction of one school improvement project which has begun to focus on a holistic approach to educating the so-called "disadvantaged," i.e., "at risk student." As implied at the onset of this study, policy-makers will in effect move into another phase of school reform attempts "with heavy baggage," i.e., obstacles to success, if the lesson(s) from past programs are not considered when planning future projects.

Background and The Setting

The major distinction between school improvement and school effectiveness initiatives is simply that the former generally focuses on school climate variables as indices of success. Unlike school improvement initiatives, school effectiveness projects are usually concerned with academic achievement, i.e., standardized test scores' improvement. Both types of programs fall within the tenets of the school

effectiveness correlates developed by Weber (1971) and Edmonds (1979).

The distinction between test data (outcome variables) and school climate (process variables) seems to be more a focus of initial emphasis within school improvement and school effectiveness programs. For example, the former tends to have school plans which suggest that after success with multiple indicators of school climate, e.g., teachers' positive expectations, improved student and staff attendance, teacher empowerment, lower student dropout and suspension rates, etc., strategic planning with a distinct focus on students' academic performance should subsequently occur. Conversely, school effectiveness programs while initially emphasizing improved student academic achievement will tend to address school climate variables as ancillary issues.

The setting for this study is a major city in the Northeast United States. According to 1980 census data, the population of this urban area is approximately 1,688,000 people. Whites comprise 58% of the total population. Blacks are 38% of the total population, and Hispanics, Asian-Americans and Others make up 4% (U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1982-1983; School District Office of Affirmative Action, 1982). A demographic breakdown of the public school system in this locale illustrates the following:

- Total student population = 202,469
- Whites = 52,148 (25.8%); Hispanics = 17,043 (8.4%);
  Asians and Others - 4,989 (2.4%);
  Blacks - 128,289 (63.4%).
- There are 257 schools in the system:
  27 senior high schools;
  6 vocational or skill centers;
  23 junior high schools;
  13 middle schools;
  13 special education schools;
  and, 175 elementary schools.

(In 1988 the district had converted nearly all the junior high schools, grades 7-9, into middle schools, grades 5/6-8, in an attempt to increase students' educational achievement; School District Administrative Survey Data, 1984; 1988). The superintendent in the third year as chief administrator of the system, in contrast to the preceding seven years under the former superintendent, instituted numerous change initiatives. The previous administration was characterized by the media as a politically responsive entity, i.e., a patronage employer. Teacher strikes, and separate maintenance workers' walkouts were held in three of the seven years under the former superintendent. In spite of labor unrest, and a generally acknowledged work climate of low morale, student gains on achievement tests were claimed by the previous administration. Although subject to various interpretations, for years the overall health of this public school district was regarded by many observers as debilitated. Public school desegregation and related matters, e.g., the fear of busing, school desegregation pairing, state imposed desegregation attempts, etc., exacerbated the potential for further disruptions in the system. Along with a continual drop in the student population, especially Whites or students of parents who could afford to send their children elsewhere, this public school system was perceived as being on the decline.

Amidst a school climate of fiscal instability, public misgivings, and employees' general apprehension, the city government (mayor and city council) initiated changes that recast the composition of the Board of Education - the governing body of the school district. The appointment of a number of new board members who stressed professionalism and fiscal responsibility led to the buy-out of the former superintendent's contract. After political maneuvering that is rarely acknowledged to exist but is commonplace in education, the present superintendent was appointed. The appointment was the result of a national search which was conducted by an independent panel sanctioned by the Board of Education.

In contrast to the former superintendent, the new school chief established an agenda that highlighted central office administrative reorganization , a definitive mission and philosophy oriented to

students, and a professionalism that illustrated familiarity with educational research and practice. Equipped with an indepth knowledge of the system, the present superintendent began to initiate policy and programs that were geared toward altering, and possibly changing, the practices associated with previous administrations.

The urban public school district in which this study took place implemented, or proposed instituting, the following initiatives for the 1984-1985 academic school year:

1. At 10 "low achieving" schools, a specific School Improvement Plan would be implemented. In the two successive years, 10 additional schools would be selected in each year to join the original cohort.

2. A new systemwide testing program was to be implemented.

3. A standardized curriculum was formally introduced, and was to be implemented and evaluated-monitored at schools throughout the district.

4. School improvement planning by principals and staff was to be given greater emphasis.

5. The school district's desegregation policy, as part of the school improvement initiative, was to be implemented and carried-out as a systemwide initiative for the second year.

6. A consistent systemwide promotion policy was to be established and implemented with a complementary remediation program.

The School Improvement Plan (SIP) was concentrated at the elementary level. The School District's desegregation policy was framed within the SIP. The apparent objective of the policy decisions was to improve schools in order to attract transfers for desegregation, as well as to ensure that "low achieving" schools were given additional resources to improve the quality of instruction. The SIP signaled a pronounced commitment to a major segment of the school population, i.e., Blacks and Hispanics.

The major stages of evolution in the School Improvement Plan were to be: (1) Introduction of the program and assessment of staffs' understanding of the goal(s); (2) Assessment of school climate variables; and, (3) Collective discussions and proposals for action by school building improvement councils that meet with central administration staff to formulate plans, and strategy, i.e., methods and tactics to meet the established goals.

According to the district's goal statement (SIP Proposal, 1983, pp. 10-11): "Over a three year period, the goal will be to assist low achieving schools to incorporate the essential elements of school effectiveness, identified above, through intensive training for reshaping schools through the replication and integration of program components that have proved successful. A network of school-based facilitators, and a series of program support incentives will be responsible for supporting this retooling and reshaping effort."

The distict's SIP proposal indicated that participation in the program would be voluntary; however, all schools selected were to meet the following criteria:

(1) Consistently performed poorly on standardized achievement tests, and other objective measures of school performance.

(2) Have many of the following characteristics:
   (a) high mobility of student enrollment
   (b) racially/culturally isolated student body
   (c) high percentage of economically disadvantaged students
   (d) recipients of previous efforts at remediation, but never has a voluntary whole school approach been used.

(3) Each school will have a significant degree of flexibility in deciding how to achieve the overall goal of the project; however, each school will agree to incorporate five basic features into its overall plan:
   (a) Use of the district's mandated curriculum in all curriculum areas.
   (b) Monitoring of student performance in all curriculum areas.
   (c) Utilization of an affective curriculum component that addresses learner self-image in a structured fashion.
   (d) Training of staff and administrators to support the reshaped school.
   (e) Training and utilization of parent scholars.

(pp. 10-11)

In the District's SIP, each school was required to follow a standard operational model which would include school based advisory councils, service support teams, parent scholars, and an integrated total staff effort. The district's long range goal suggested implementation of the SIP model in the majority of the city's public schools. "The resulting improvement of those schools will stimulate public confidence thereby enhancing the district's desegregation effort" (District's SIP Proposal, 1983, pp. 11-12).

The list of program objectives detailed by the district's proposal are summarized below:

A. To improve students' attitudes toward school ...

B. Improvement of students' performance in reading comprehension and mathematics computation on a standardized achievement test.

C. Improvement of students' performance in science and social studies on Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills.

D. A statistically significant improvement in staff morale and cooperation ...

E. An increase in school staff participation in voluntary and required activities.

F. To change the role of the principals to the extent that:
(1) there will be a statistically significant ($p < .10$) positive change in teachers' perceptions;
(2) principals will have plans, schedules, and other evidence of a regular, consistent effort as the instructional leaders of their schools.

G. To develop positive attitudes on the part of parents.

(SIP Proposal, pp. 13-15)

The above discussion suggests that the typical urban public school improvement initiative is associated with desegregation issues. Faced with the limited success of integrating African-Americans, Whites, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans into a quality educational environment, many urban public schools have developed a "Priority" status model.

Such a model essentially seeks to focus added resources-personnel, funding, staff development, buildings' repairs, etc., on so-called racially isolated schools, i.e., schools where the student population has no (or a few) white students. These schools, historically as well as presently, rank lowest in student academic achievement, faculty morale, school climate, staff and student absences, suspensions and low community (parent) support of the educational programs.

The school improvement program components in this public school district are similar to the other urban school improvement projects which focus on: (a) staff development; (b) administrative leadership and teacher empowerment under the rubric of school improvement councils. School planning has become the foremost process that attempts to guide the schools' implementation efforts. At nearly every school organizational level, especially elementary schools (grades 1-6) and junior high/middle schools (grades 5/6-9), teachers and administrators meet, plan and produce a tangible document that serves as the blueprint for the upcoming school year. (Long-range planning also occurs.) The high schools' organizational structure preempts immediate application of the school effectiveness tenets.

The discussion in this section has provided an overview of the school improvement project in one urban public school system in the United States. The discussion to follow will illustrate the program evaluation results, to date, which have not yielded definitive findings to support the view that school improvement initiatives are effective.

Evaluation and Implications

Students' standardized test scores in the school system in which this case study occurred continued to show slight improvement over the last 2-3 years (Ayrer, 1988). However, when one isolates the twenty-four elementary and two junior high schools involved in the school improvement program, in addition to the approximately 52 elementary schools identified as Priority One, i.e., racially isolated and historically low achieving, the test results do not indicate overall academic improvement (see, e.g., McNamara, 1987). Also, parent involvement at Priority One schools continues to be a problem.

An analysis of school climate variables which were the initial focus of the school improvement councils indicated, at best, mixed results. The following is a synopsis of some of the school climate variables which were evaluated over a three year period (1985-1986-1987):

Staff Attendance

. Over the three year period (1984-1987), the teacher absence rate for the schools involved in the improvement program declined by 0.2% in 1986, and increased by 0.5% in 1987.

Student Attendance

. Student attendance decreased by 0.56% between 1985-86; and, it decreased by 1.86% between 1985-1987 for the schools involved in the school improvement program.

Student Suspension

. The schools involved in the improvement program had a higher suspension rate than the overall school district rate.

Student Withdrawals

. The student withdrawal rate, i.e., the number and percentage of students that left school, was slightly less than the School District's overall rate for the years 1984-1985 and 1985-1986.

Student Turnover

. The student turnover rate, i.e., the influx and migration of students in a given school, decreased in the school improvement project schools over the three year period 1984-1987.

The above school climate variables were analyzed within the context of twenty-six schools that participated in the school improvement project. The variables served as multiple indicators, and without a consideration of standardized test scores, the following question was posed: Is the project working, i.e., effective in regards to improved school climate at individual schools and the overall project?

The data trends indicated that while a worsening of school climate in the school improvement project schools was not a dominant feature (as it may have been without the program), no claims of improvement in the overall project can be determined from the data at this time (for a detailed discussion of the evaluation results, see, Pugh, 1988).

The literature on school improvement programs, and project implementation has suggested that a minimum of two-three years is necessary to begin to answer conclusively the question of project impact, i.e., implementation status (see, e.g., Hoy and Miskel, 1982). On the basis of the data trends and analysis made of this project, the following conclusion can be made: The District's school improvement project after three years has not become effective to a point of producing consistent improvements in school climate (or test results).

In other school districts in America, the findings on various school effectiveness/school improvement programs have yet to be established as a validation of the success of the effectiveness movement (see, e.g., Christner, 1987; Frechtling, 1987; Frechtling, et. al., 1984). While clearly there are promising signs in school improvement projects, the critical ingredient and resulting impediment to program success are implementation strategies. Applicable here, as Vandenberghe (1988) points out in his study of school improvement from a European perspective, "Policy-makers pay more attention to formation of the goals than to their implementation; they underestimate the difficulty and complexity of implementation" (p. 85).

The implementation process has received attention in the research literature. A myriad of issues have been suggested which impact on the implementation of a project (see, e.g., Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; McLaughlin, 1987; Newberg and DeLeone, 1981; Schlechty, 1976; Weatherley and Lipsky, 1977).

The analyses of the data trends from this study, and a synthesis of the school improvement research/evaluation literature, suggest the following policy recommendations:

(1). School improvement programs must continue to emphasize and develop school-based leadership.

At individual schools, and within the entire project, leadership must be developed especially among school principals and teachers. School personnel, with assistance from central/district office staff, must be able to meet, discuss, and assess the program's status. As part of the school improvement planning process, specific strategies are needed that are unique to the individual settings. Such strategies and planning should be generated at the school level along with attempts to address issues related to the lack of improvement as well as what works (Coladarci and Donaldson, 1987; Gottfredson and Gottredson, 1987; Rosenholtz, 1985).

(2). The involvement of central office, e.g., research/evaluation personnel and curriculum specialists, along with other district offices' support, needs to occur, continue and possibly expand.

Consistent with the tenets that underlie school effectiveness and school improvement programs, the supportive role of the central and district offices is paramount (Cox, 1983; Eubanks and Levine, 1987; Huberman, 1983). Critical to the involvement of central and district offices staff is the need for well-defined roles. A coordinated and clearly defined level of involvement is necessary which recognizes the school-based leadership potential of teachers and principals. A unique staff development program that utilizes reflection-in-action, as well as ideas generated at the school level is imperative (see, e.g., Featherstone, 1986: Joyce, et. al., 1983; Rorshach and Whitney, 1986; Schon, 1983).

(3). Long-range administrative stability in the projects must be accomplished.

In evaluative studies on program implementation it is recognized that the occurrence of "executive shifts", i.e., upper level management changes, have impact of limiting the continuity of a project. As a result, implementation becomes potentially more difficult. Also, questions of "commitment" and upper level support may develop within the perspective of those at the school level. The necessity of communicating as well as limiting management changes must be considered as a factor affecting a project's success. In the case study, for

example, in spite of commitments by school principals to stay at their sites for the duration of the project, a number of principals transferred (for better school settings and/or increased salary based on school size, i.e., student enrollment); and, a number of key high-ranking central office project managers left the system, or were shifted to other areas of responsibility. While career changes and advancement are to be expected, a project's successful implementation will be hampered by "executive shifts" (see, e.g., Cohen, 1987; Freiberg, 1987).

(4). Recognition of "pockets of excellence" within school improvement projects should occur, and attempts at duplication/expansion effectuated.

One of the chief reoccurring themes in the research literature on school effectiveness/school improvement programs is the view that in spite of preliminary program results, based on test scores and other quantitative indicators which suggest limited overall program improvements, within school excellence is evident at some grade levels and/or within individual classrooms (Frechtling, 1987; Freiberg, 1987; Mandeville, 1987; Stringfield, 1987; Jones-Wilson, ed., 1988). Administrators need to build-on and expand exemplary practices thru collegial staff development, the master teacher concept, and/or focus group discussions within and across schools in such projects.

Wilson (1987) in his book, The Truly Disadvantaged, points out that the issue of helping the so-called "underclass" requires a multifacited agenda. Major American public school systems are initiating or expanding programs that address teen-pregnancy, drop-outs, illiteracy, unemployment, etc.

The school district in this case study has begun to focus on comprehensive services, i.e., pre-natal care, early childhood education, parenting skills coupled with adult literacy classes which utilize computer technology.

The future direction of school improvement programs also entails a focus on students' mental health. The "Comer Process" is receiving increased consideration. This process developed by James Comer at Yale University connects school planning with a mental health team, a school governance and management team, while initiating special projects for students, parents and teachers in a school climate conducive to learning (Comer, 1988).

At the high school level (grades 9-12), the urban public school system in this case study has begun to reorganize the schools into smaller (more manageable units - schools within schools). Junior high schools (grades 7-9) have all been converted to middle schools (grades 5/6-8), in an attempt to address the educational and social needs/development of adolescents.

Supplementary Services Centers, i.e., off-site buildings, are being planned near elementary schools (grades 1-6) which will focus on homework assistance and parent/community participation in the educational process. The involvement of major area colleges and universities, as well as the business community, has been solicited by school systems. "Academically-based public service" is developing. The significance of urban universities working collaboratively with the school system and community, in a shared/responsible, and "non-hierarchical" manner offers tremendous potential for a reciprocal relationship among all parties. The concept of community centered schools is being given attention. This would involve the school building as a centerpiece for improving the community, as well as providing comprehensive services.

A significant national development that has recently occurred relative to school effectiveness/school improvement programs has been the restructuring of federal funding. Chapter I money (as it is termed) can now be used by urban school districts to provide low-achieving schools the latitude to direct supplementary services at any student who is deemed to be in need of additional academic assistance. No longer are students' family income (poverty level) and test scores (below the 16%ile) the sole criteria for Chapter I academic support.

This study suggests that America's major urban public school systems have made limited progress, to date, in achieving positive results based on the components of the school effectiveness research. However, problems related to project implementation and the truncated duration of programs have been chief contributors to this finding. In the school district discussed in this case study, the 20-26 schools in a special "pilot" school improvement program are now consumed under a new project entitled Priority 1. Approximately 50 other elementary and middle schools are also in the Priority 1 project.

In response to the limited progress achieved in the initial school improvement project in this urban school district, comprehensive and supplementary services are being piloted at a number of schools without the previous restrictions of government regulations. Building on the foundation and tenets of school effectiveness/school improvement research, and with an understanding of the impediments to program success, the future of America's public school improvement efforts do show promise.

Conclusion

To date, the research on school effectiveness/school improvement programs throughout the United States has neither confirmed nor denied the practical application of the school effectiveness tenets as genaralizable precepts. As Edmonds (1979) pointed out, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need..."

This paper has sought to highlight the results of one major urban public school project. The evaluation findings along with the policy implications suggest that school effectiveness tenets are viable means of initiating educational reform. However, implementation and related issues which were detailed herein suggest that teacher empowerment is a critical aspect of this and all other attempts at producing quality education. Maeroff (1988) indicates that when teacher empowerment truly occurs, education improves. As policy-makers and administrators at all levels of the educational hierarchy begin to address the issue of project implementation associated with teacher empowerment, educational excellence for all students will be closer to a reality.

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